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ABSTRACT

This document describes a program for custodial parents which was designed to facilitate children's adjustment after parental divorce. Four steps in the development of the program are described: (1) examining existing literature for theoretical frameworks and empirical studies on the development of adjustment problems in children of divorce; (2) conducting generative studies to provide further insight into the processes that may lead to adjustment problems; (3) designing an intervention to affect the critical processes identified in the research; and (4) evaluating the intervention using a randomized field trial. The content and format of the program are briefly described, and plans for evaluating the efficacy of the intervention are presented. Issues such as the quality of the custodial parent-child relationship, discipline strategies, negative divorce events, contact with the noncustodial parent, and contact with nonparental adults are discussed, and the depression, anxiety, and aggression that can result from problems in these areas are considered. Intervention techniques for each of these issues are identified. (NB)

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Translating Empirical Findings into an Intervention for Children of Divorce

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Translating Empirical Findings into an Intervention for Children of Divorce

Making the link between research findings and an intervention program is a complex task. In this paper, we will illustrate how theory and basic research can inform the design and evaluation of a program for custodial parents which is designed to facilitate children's adjustment after divorce. In addition, we will briefly describe the content and format of the program and present our plans for evaluating the efficacy of the intervention.

The development of our program involved four steps: First, we examined the existing literature for theoretical frameworks and empirical studies on the development of adjustment problems in children of divorce. Second, we conducted several generative studies to provide further insight into the processes that may lead to adjustment problems. Third, we designed an intervention designed to affect the critical processes identified in our own and others' research. Last, we are in the process of evaluating the intervention using a randomized field trial.

There is growing consensus that divorce is best conceptualized as an ongoing process of multiple environmental changes which accompany the restructuring of the family unit rather than as a single, dichotomous event (Felner et al., 1980; Felner et al., in press; Hetherington, 1979; Kurdek, 1981; Sandler et al., 1988) and that children's adjustment to divorce is affected by the number and type of environmental events they experience. The underlying

theoretical model of our intervention program is consistent with this consensus. In broad stokes, we view the adjustment problems of children as a consequence of both the stressful environmental events which may occur during this transition in family structure and of the protective resources available to the child (e.g., Felner et al, 1980; 1983; in press; Kurdek, 1981; Sandler et al., 1985; 1988). One important program development principle that follows from this theoretical model is that not all children of divorce are in need of an intervention program. Rather, need for an intervention is a function of the stressful postdivorce events such as interparental conflict and the protective resources these children experience.

Identifying those families in need of the intervention required the development of a screening instrument (Pillow, Braver, Sandler & Wolchik, 1988). Our theoretical framework guided the selection of variables in the screening measure

thus, three indicators of divorce related events and two measures of the quality of the child's relationship with the custodial parent were included. Given the empirical basis of the theoretical model, it is not surprising that scores on this measure are significantly related to adjustment problems of children of divorce.

In the absence of empirical data which could guide the selection of a cutoff score, we selected to include families if their screening score was above the 30th percentile. Thus families who were functioning in the top 30 precent on a summary indicator of variables targeted for change in the

intervention were considered low risk and were excluded. Although a full discussion of screening is clearly beyond the scope of my presentation today, we feel that screening in prevention trials has several important advantages including increasing statistical power to detect program effects, increasing cost-effectiveness, decreasing attrition, and minimizing iatrogenic effects.

It is important to note that our work in the area of screening is in its early stages. Critical questions for future research include assessment of the stability of risk status and assessment of whether the efficacy of the intervention differs as a function of risk status.

Before leaving the issue of screening, we need to discuss briefly our procedures for high end screening. We excluded and referred for immediate treatment children whose scores were greater than 2 standard deviations above the mean on the Children's Depression Inventory (Kovacs, 1981) or who were suicidal. We felt that such children were in need of more immediate intervention than they could receive in our program were they assigned to the delayed intervention group and that their problems would be better addressed by a program that focused specifically on depression. Parents who experienced current suicidal ideation were also referred for treatment elsewhere.

Given our theoretical model, we selected to use custodial parents as change agents rather than work directly with the children themselves. We did this for several reasons. First,

because custodial parents exert so much control over the child's environment, they are able to change stressful aspects of it which are deterimental to the child's adjustment. Second, many of the environmental occurrences which are harmful to children, are beyond the child's control. For example, a child can do little to change the level of overt conflict between his parents. Third, there is a large literature that demonstrates that a warm and accepting relationship with the custodial parent is associated with more positive divorce adjustment (Fogas, Wolchik & Braver, 1987; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1978; Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). By working with parents, we can enhance and/or mobilize this protective resource. Finally, parents have been shown to be effective change agents for a wide variety of behavior problems (c.f., Wells & Forehand, 1981).

Our theoretical model guided us to focus on decreasing stressful aspects of the child's environment and on enhancing relationships or dimensions of relationships. Selection of which specific aspects of the environment to target for change was based on the empirical literature on social and environmental factors that are related to children's adjustment after divorce. The constructs selected were: the quality of the child's relationship with the custodial parent, discipline strategies, amount of contact between the child and the noncustodial parent, negative divorce events including interparental conflict and amount of contact with nonparental adults. For each of these constructs, there is

ample literature demonstrating that divorce often, but not necessarily, leads to change in these areas and that children's adjustment is significantly related to these factors (e.g., Balls et al., 1988; Emery, 1982; Fogas et al.,1987; Forehand et al., 1986; Guidubaldi et al., 1983; Long et al., 1987; 1988; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1978; 1981; Jacobsen, 1978; Kurdek, 1981;1985;1988; Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Wolchik et al., 1988).

Let's take a look at this slide which depicts our theoretical model of the adjustment problems of children of divorce. Divorce leads to environmental changes which in turn have a significant impact on children's adjustment. For example, the quality of the custodial parent-child relationship change during the process of divorce. These changes include the onset of a coercive cycle of negative interactions (Hetherington et al., 1981) and decreases in the time the custodial parent spends in both caregiving and play activities (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Divorce is also related to changes in discipline practices (Hetherington et al., 1981). Changes in discipline are fairly easy to understand. Newly divorced custodial parents are often faced with taking on aspects of discipline which were the domain of the former spouse. Also, the stressors of divorce can affect the parent's level of tolerance, with increased sensitivity to misbehaviors and decreased sensitivity to positive behaviors being common

among divorcing mothers (Hetherington et al., 1981).

The next mediator on the slide is negative divorce-related events including interparental conflict. Frequently of divorce are observers of the battles their parents wage (c.f.,Emery, 1982). Interparental conflict clearly starts well before the legal process of divorce is initiated and continues to be a significant problem in many families of divorce. For example, researchers have reported that at 2 months after divorce, 60% of interparental exchanges were conflictual (Hetherington et al., 1981) and that interparental conflict in the context of visitation is a common occurrence for many children of divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Other negative divorce related events include environmental changes such as moving and changing schools.

Nearly all children experience a significant decrease in contact with one of their parents, typically the father. Although some children may actually have more contact with their fathers shortly after the divorce (Hetherington et al., 1978), most children experience a rapid tapering off of contact and at two years after divorce, most children do not have consistent contact with their fathers (e.g., Fulton, 1979; Furstenberg et al., 1985).

The last mediator we address in our program is contact with nonparental adults. Along with diminished contact with their noncustodial parents, children often experience a drop in contact with the adult friends and relatives of the noncustodial parent. Also, the social networks of custodial parents change with divorce (Hetherington et al., 1981) and

this can affect the help and support available to children of divorce.

As mentioned earlier, there is consistent empirical support for the relatior between each of these variables and children's adjustment after divorce. As illustrated in the slide, our program impacts on these mediating variables which then affect children's adjustment.

For some of these constructs, the control exerted by the custodial parent is obvious. Although the custodial parent clearly has less control over others such as contact with the noncustodial parent and interparental conflict, it is reasonable to assume that changing the custodial parent's behavior can lead to changes in other parts of the system. For example, by removing obstacles to visitation, the custodial parent can make it easier or more comfortable for the noncustodial parent to visit, and contact may increase.

The specific intervention procedures developed to modify each of these constructs are shown in Figure 2. We frequently selected similar techniques to those used in Warren et al.'s (1984) program for custodial parents. Wherever possible, we employed techniques which have previously been shown to be effective in changing the mediating process. For example, in selecting techniques to enhance the quality of the custodial parent child relationship, we relied heavily on Forehand's and Patterson's work with families. The specific change techniques included: positive family activities (Pleasure breaks), quality/special

time; monitoring and reinforcement for children's positive behaviors; and listening skills (mirroring, continuing, content and feeling responses). Discipline strategies were enhanced by self-monitoring discipline strategies and by practicing using consistent consequences to increase or decrease the frequency of two specific behaviors. Anger management training (Novaco, 1975) was used to decrease interparental conflict. Contact with the noncustodial parent was increased by discussion of the impact of this relationship on children's well-being and by identification and removal of obstacles such as restrictions on telephone calls, inflexibility in visitation arrangements and picking fights at visitation pick ups and drop offs. Contact with nonparental adults was enhanced by assessing the child's social network, identifying possible resources in the community (e.g., boy scouts, clubs, etc.) and encouraging parents to use these resources.

These skills were taught in a series of 10 structured group sessions and 2 structured individual sessions. Short lectures, group discussion, skills practice and problem solving of difficulties encountered in implementing program skills with the children at home are central components of each session. The groups were led by 2 doctoral or postdoctoral students in community or clinical psychology.

Each session began with an interactive, didactic discussion of a mediating variable. In these discussions, we used parents' experiences with their children to illustrate how divorce affects these mediators. These experiences were

used to develop a rationale for needing to make some changes in this aspect of the child's environment. Some time was also spent discussing the link between this mediator and children's adjustment. Next, we described a specific skill to change the mediator and the group leaders demonstrated this skill. The parents then practiced the new skill and got feedback from other group members and the groups leaders. Parents generated obstacles to using the skill at home with their children and the group identified solutions to these obstacles. Practicing the new skill was assigned as homework and both problems and success in implementing the skill with their children were a focus of the homework review which occurred in the next session.

For example, to enhance the quality of the child's relationship with the custodial parent, we first introduced this mediator by describing the negative, coercive cycle that characterizes many parent-child interactions during the process of divorce. Parents provided specific examples of these negative exchanges with their children. We then talked about the importance of changing this pattern of interaction and how the amount of warmth and acceptance children experience in their relationship with the custodial parent has been consistently shown to affect children's adjustment after divorce. Over the next few sessions, the tools or skills for increasing warmth and acceptance- special time, positive recognition, continuing responses, content responses, and feeling responses- were demonstrated,

practiced, and assigned as homework.

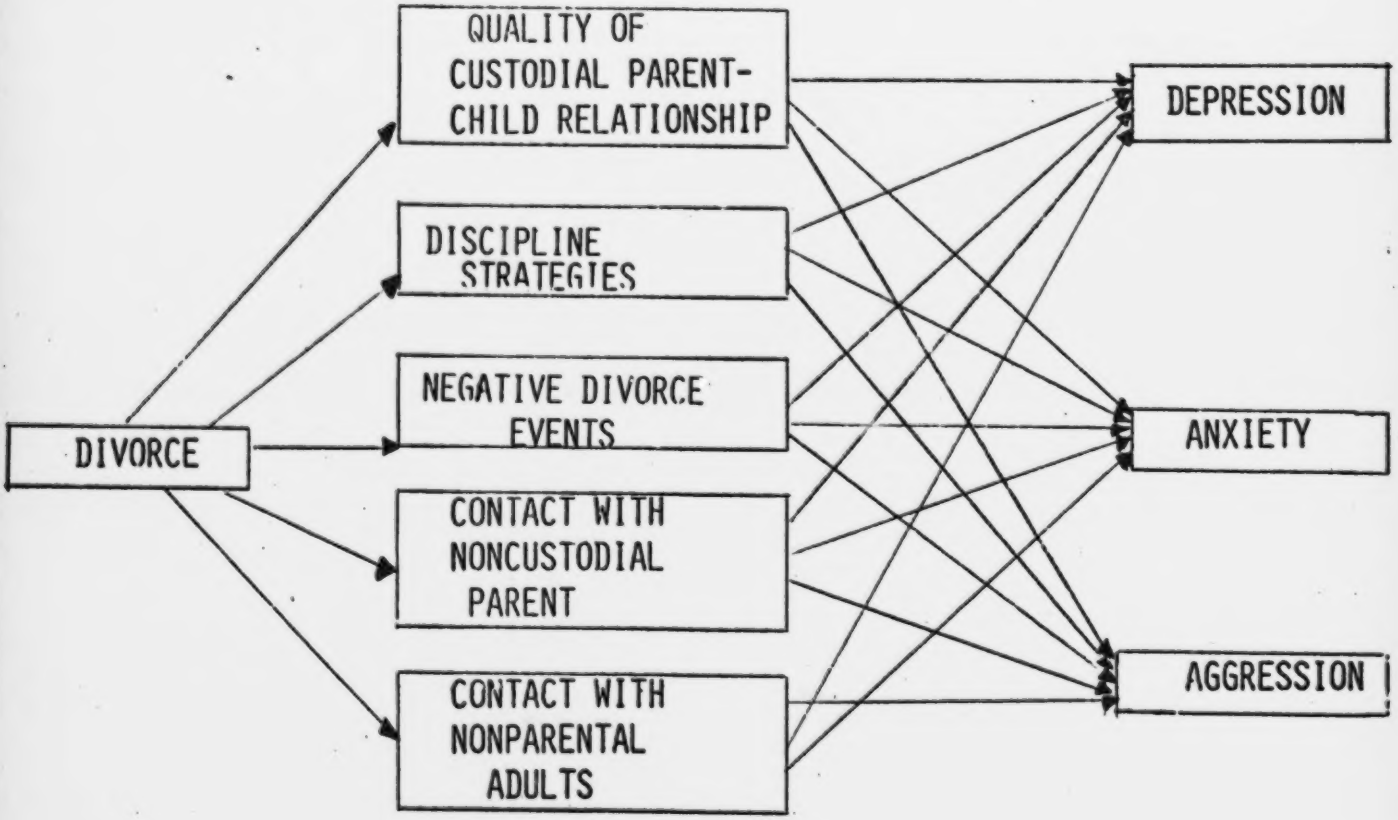
Figure 3 shows an outline of the sessions. As you can see, in addition to the sessions focusing on the mediating processes, we included three sessions that deal specifically with maintenance. In the first of these, we teach time management skills and values clarification skills to help parents manage the increased time demands needed to implement the program. In the second, we discuss relapse prevention (Marlatt,1973) and help parents develop plans to cope with set backs that will occur after the program ends. The effectiveness of these plans are the focus of the maintenance session, which is held three months after the tenth session.

Two other aspects of our program are relevant to maintenance: the handouts we give the parents on each of the skills we teach and the homework review. Throughout the program, parents receive handouts and we encourage parents to keep these handouts in a notebook. We also encourage parents to reread sections of their notebooks when they are experiencing difficulties after the program ends. The homework review that occurs each session can be viewed, in part, as a maintenance strategy. In this section, parents share obstacles that have gotten in the way of doing homework as well as generate solutions to these problems. When faced with similar obstacles in the future, parents may choose to try some of these solutions.

The use of parents as change agents necessitates careful attention to whether the parents learn the program skills as well as whether the parents actually use these skills with

their children. Ways to ensure that the parents learn the skills include: using a format that where group members actively participate in didactic presentations, demonstrating the skills, having parents practice the skills during the sessions, providing corrective feedback about their use of these skills, and giving parents plenty of opportunities to discuss problems they encounter in implementing these skills. The probability that parents use the skills with their children can be enhanced by assigning homework each week, having the parents self-monitor successes and problems they encounter, reinforcing parents for their efforts to use these skills and allowing parents to share their successes and problems with other group members.

The effectiveness of the program is currently being evaluated using a randomized experimental versus control group design. Participants are female custodial parents who have divorced during the past two years and have at least one child between the ages of 8 to 15. Measures of both the mediating constructs as well as the children's adjustment are obtained from parents' and children's perspectives. We also have an extensive process evaluation component in which the degree to which the program is delivered as intended is systematically assessed. In addition, we measure the parents' satisifaction with various parts of the program. To date, our N is approximately 50. Over the next year, we will augment our sample to a total of about 75 and hopefully, next year at this time we will be able to share information on the efficacy of our intervention with you.


QUALITY OF CUSTODIAL PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP
DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES
NEGATIVE DIVORCE EVENTS
CONTACT WITH NONCUSTODIAL PARENT
CONTACT WITH NONPARENTAL ADULTS
DIVORCE
DEPRESSION
ANXIETY
AGGRESSION

MODIFIABLE MEDIATORS	INTERVENTION TECHNIQUE
QUALITY OF CUSTODIAL PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP	POSITIVE FAMILY ACTIVITIES (PLEASURE BREAKS). QUALITY/SPECIAL TIME. MONITORING AND REINFORCEMENT OF CHILD'S POSITIVE BEHAVIORS. LISTENING SKILLS (CONTINUING, CONTENT & FEELING RESPONSES).
DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES	SELF-MONITORING OF DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES. PRACTICE USING CONSISTENT CONSEQUENCES.
NEGATIVE DIVORCE EVENTS	ANGER MANAGEMENT SKILLS, LISTENING SKILLS
CONTACT WITH NONCUSTODIAL PARENT	EDUCATION RE: IMPACT/IMPORTANCE OF TIME WITH NONCUSTODIAL PARENTS. IDENTIFICATION OF CUSTODIAL PARENTS' OBSTACLES TO CONTACT. EVALUATION OF ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES OF REMOVING OBSTACLES.
CONTACT WITH NONPARENTAL ADULTS	SOCIAL NETWORK ASSESSMENT. IDENTIFICATION OF POTENTIAL RESOURCES. ARTICULATION OF PLAN TO AUGMENT CONTACT.

SESSION/TOPIC(S)	SKILLS
1. INTRODUCTION	INFORMATION ABOUT EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN AND ROLE OF CUSTODIAL PARENT IN FACILITATING ADJUSTMENT
2. REVERSING THE STRESS INTERACTION CYCLE	QUALITY/SPECIAL TIME
3. ENHANCING COMMUNICATION-I POSITIVE DISCIPLINE	CONTINUING RESPONSES CATCH 'EM BEING GOOD
3A OBSTACLES TO PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION (INDIVIDUAL SESSION)	PROBLEM-SOLVING
4. ENHANCING COMMUNICATION-II	MIRRORING CONTENT RESPONSES
5. ENHANCING COMMUNICATION-III SPECIFIC DIVORCE RELATED CONCERNS	FEELING RESPONSES
6. NONCUSTODIAL PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIP	IDENTIFICATION OF OBSTACLES; ASSESSMENT OF ADVANTAGES/ DISADVANTAGES OF REMOVING OBSTACLES
6A KEEPING CHILDREN OUT OF THE WAR ZONE	ANGER MANAGEMENT SKILLS
CONTACT WITH NONPARENTAL ADULTS (INDIVIDUAL SESSION)	SOCIAL NETWORK ASSESSMENT
7. DISCIPLINE I	SELF MONITORING; PRACTICE USING CONSISTENT CONSEQUENCES
8. DISCIPLINE II	SELF MONITORING; PRACTICE USING USING CONSISTENT CONSEQUENCES
9. KEEPING THE PROGRAM GOING	TIME MANAGEMENT; VALUES CLARIFICATION
10. DEALING WITH SETBACKS	RELAPSE PREVENTION STRATEGIES